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ABSTRACT

As more women enter the work force, a new family phenomenon is emerging - the shared parenting household. To examine the dynamics of this new family type, 40 couples in shared parenting families were interviewed. In these families, both parents shared the responsibilities of primary caregiver while also working at full-time white collar or professional jobs or being enrolled in academic programs. Preliminary findings revealed that both women and men in shared parenting families felt a disidentification with their own same-sex parent. Mothers reported entering shared parenthood to avoid feared losses of their own identity; fathers reported entering it with expected gains. Mothers described their relationships with their children as "nurturing" while fathers described the father-child relationship as "intimate". Mothers often expressed feelings of jealousy and rejection because of the bond between father and child. Although the child may feel caught in the middle, the shared parenting family can generate for the child an understanding that men, like women, are feeling people who can express their emotions. At the same time, the child is provided with role models of women who are multidimensional in their lives and experiences. Hopefully, the child in a shared parenting family will be able to integrate the father's intimacy and the mother's nurturing so that these qualities are woven into one person, male or female, who can someday offer both qualities to his or her own child (NRB)

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MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD: THE SHARED PARENTING FAMILY

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MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD: THE SHARED PARENTING FAMILY

As the ascription of women to the role of motherhood is challenged and as economic necessity declares that both mothers and fathers enter the labor force to support their families, a new family phenomenon is slowly emerging--the shared parenting household. In these households both men and women attempt to fully share between them the daily responsibiities of raising their children. As social scientists and mental health professionals, we ask, 1) Is such a family really possible?; 2) What does it actually look like?; 3) What are the effects of such an arrangement on both children and parents?; and 4) Can we presribe this arrangement as beneficial to the mental health of family members involved?

This paper will address these questions by presenting some of the preliminary findings of a research study presently being conducted by the author at The Wright Institute, Berkeley, California. The project involves in-depth clinical interviews with forty couples identified as shared parenting families. In these families both parents have been assessed as sharing the responsibilities and role of primary caretaker. The age range

of the participants was 25 to 45, with the modal group being in their mid to late 30's. In addition to parenting, all of the informants were engaged in full-time white collar or professional jobs or were enrolled in an academic program. The age range of their children was two months to 14 years. The sample was equally divided between families with one and families with two children. No family had more than two children. Data will be called upon to demonstrate that while easier said than done, true shared parenting between women and men is indeed occurring, but with an unexpected twist in family dynamics that has implications for the emotional well being of each of the family members.

The first step is to examine why the women and why the men gravitated toward a shared parenting relationship. For each of the women, there were the practical realities that a) she needed to work at a paid job to contribute to the financial support of the family; b) therefore she was unwilling to also be the sole primary parenting figure and end up doing two jobs for the price of one. In almost all cases the women interviewed had professional training and intended to put it to full use in their adulthood, whether or not it be their childbearing years. If they had not earlier had professional training or education, they were now in the process of getting it. The women interviewed had also all been influenced by the feminist movement, particularly by the challenge to unfair gender divisions in the family and at the workplace. They, in the

context of a larger women's movement, questioned the institution of motherhood as defined in Western society.

This is what appears at the surface. However, a deeper probe exposes a rich panorama of undergrowth concerning the shared parenting mother's desires and fears about an integrated adulthood. The women overwhelmingly expressed a strong disidentification from their own mothers. They saw their mothers, all of whom had full-time parenting responsibilities, as unhappy, trapped, and unfulfilled. Given this perception of their like-sex parent, the emotional outcome is that these women incorporate a retrospective vision of their own selves as either a burden or an impediment to someone else's fulfillment. Ironically, then, for the shared parenting mother, there is both a sense of maternal disidentification while at the same time a strong desire for maternal reparation. She will escape being anything like her own mother was. Yet she will also make it up to that mother by carrying on the progeny and doing something different in her own life. This something different is both something more and something less. She will be more outwardly focused with a presence and identity in the pubic world. She will be less of a devoted, full-time mother in the home.

These women, then, were weighted by their own history in their decision to become a shared parent. Their stance was reactive against what they knew from their own childhood and growing up. This leaves these women always in struggle against something. That something is the regressive pull toward

traditional mothering. The women reported the pull as coming from within and from without. From within was the sense of guilt for betraying their own mother and the doubts as to whether they really were being a "committed" parent, given years of internalized socialization that a woman's destiny is to become a mother. From without was the pressure of "informed" researchers, child development experts, popular media, and extended family, who assume mother involvement and focus on the importance of the mother for the child's health and welfare. From without also was the felt reality that they did not have the same opportunities in the workplace and public world as a man did and that they were often expected to be a mother first in those contexts.

Given these pulls in the opposite direction, the major task facing the women interviewed was to preserve boundaries around their extra-mothering selves. There was a fierceness and determination when the women spoke of the importance of their work, the insistence that their male partner recognize and support that work in his own willingness to share the childrearing. They expressed quite openly their ambivalence concerning the institution of motherhood, not ambivalence about their own experience in the present, but ambivalence concerning the risks and potential entrapment of motherhood for women's ultimate self-actualization. They vascillate back and forth between mother guilt, that they are not doing enough or fulfilling maternal obligations, and resentment, that their

partner is not really carrying his weight in the intricacies and subtleties of shared parenting responsibilities. Some of the women admitted only sheepishly their pleasure in making time to stay home with their child. As often as not, other women spoke of their frustration during periods when they did have to stay home with the child full-time.

Ideally, a happy balance is struck between these two extremes and the woman is able to reap the benefits of having the best of both possible worlds, the opportunity to mother and the opportunity to develop a work or public identity or have a life that goes beyond the walls of kitchen and nursery. But she must do some internal battling, along with external negotiating, to get there. Both the balance and the battle accurately describe the majority of women interviewed.

When it came to actual mothering, the women interviewed reported ease in establishing a close relationship with their children. When she is with her child, the shared parenting mother experiences herself as very much involved and preoccupied with the child. With some wistfulness, admiration, or even irritation she observes the ability of her male partner to tend to the child while also reading his newspaper or doing other tasks. When she tends to the child, that is often all she does. This seems to contradict the popular portrayal and common assumption that women, rather than men, are more efficient in the home: they can both cook the dinner and manage the child, while

Dad is all thumbs in these pursuits. The difference these families report is that usually what Dad manages to slip in or integrate is his nonfamilial life with his parenting responsibilities--reading a book and tending to baby, for example. Both these mothers and fathers agree that the women have a much harder time doing this in the confines of the home. The shared parenting mother can integrate other familial tasks, but not so easily her external work life with her child-tending. She is therfore continually striving toward some sense of boundaries so that she is not engulfed by motherhood, either by design or default.

In this context, the mothers often expressed strong love and affection, but little romanticism in relationship to their children. There was a practical mode underlying their reporting that rings true of women throughout the ages. Their responsibilities and relationships within the home were a given fact. They had expected them to be there and to be an important part of their life. The discovery of the pleasures of being with their child was a delight, but no incredible surprise to these women. At some deep level they had been primed for it.

Each of the women and men interviewed were asked whether they thought they had a nurturing or an intimate relationship with their child. Every woman but two responded "nurturing." They were aware that they were taking care of another human

being who is smaller and less powerful, less articulate than them. They are also aware that they will give more than they will receive in the immediate sense. The benefits are often to be reaped much later in what they will get back from the child. In this vein, the women report all that they learned from their mothers and from their grandmothers before them. There is nothing new or innovative in contemplating or actually experiencing that they as women will be having a very close daily connection with a child. What is new is that this connection will not involve as much time as did the one their own mother had with them.

How does this compare to the experience of the fathers interviewed? The father, like the mother, was also disidentifying from his like-sex parent in becoming a shared parent. The men typically remembered their fathers as either physically or emotionally absent, or involved, but only in a circumscribed way given the limitations of a full-time job and proscriptions of what men were not expected to do at home. Regardless of actual circumstance, the men expressed a universal feeling that whatever they got from their fathers was not enough. With the backing of the feminist movement and changing economic and social realities, the fathers, like the mothers, expressed a strong desire to do reparations, making it up to their own children by being more involved. The man, too, like his female partner, recognized the loss incurred by his like-sex parent. His own father was denied the opportunity to develop a

close, tight bond with a child just as he as the child was denied receiving that from his father.

Some men spoke with relief that their father was not more involved, as they did not think very highly of their fathers. This attitude reflects an alienation from their own fathers, men they never really got to know. The father who is known only from a distance is often idealized. These particular men, at least in their retrospective reports, were just as likely to devalue him. Only one father in the study reported a role reversal in which his own father was much more the mother in terms of daily emotional involvement. Interestingly enough, this same father repeated the same phenomenon in his own family, with him clearly the more involved of the two parents in their son's life. With the exception of this particular man, each of the other fathers in the study was attempting to undo the type of fathering he had experienced in his own childhood.

The father's entry into shared parenting has more to do with expected gains than feared losses. This is in contrast to the woman who enters parenthood with a fear of loss of her self if she were to do full-time mothering. For the man, he enters parenthood looking to discover something new, to get closeness with a child, to be included in his child's daily experience. Clearly in doing this he incurs a loss, the loss of the opportunity to devote himself unabashedly and full-time to his work life, career identity or extrafamiial endeavors. This is not an easy loss for a man.

The fathers, also, like the women, were being reactive in their choice to become shared parents. But the pressures behind this reactiveness came from two sources. First, there were the perceived inadequacies of the fathering they themselves received in childhood. Second, there were the external pressures placed on them by the women with whom they were presently living. About half the men reported that they involved themselves in shared parenting in part or totally because that is what their female partner wanted. These men recognized that she would not be happy or could not tolerate it any other way. Furthermore, these men were fair-minded individuals and could not see how it would be equitable any other way. In no situation was the reverse true: not one couple reported that the man pressured the woman into shared parenting. The more the men were less touched themselves by the feminist movement, the more they answered that they did it (accepted equal parenting responsibilities) for the woman. The more the feminist movement had in some way been incorporated into their own being and understandings, the more they reported that they themselves would not have it any other way.

For all the men, there was an experience of pioneering. It is unusual in this culture for a man to mother a child. There are few historical or cultural models. These men really did not know what to expect. In contrast to the women, they reported that they were really "blown over" by the actual experience of parenting. It was much more intense and emotionally moving than they ever could have expected. In short,

they ended up falling in love with their children, in a romantic, but not sexualized way. They were crazy about their children, felt pulled to center their emotional life around them. It should be added, however, that the pull was not strong enough to keep them from placing their children in day care or arranging for sick child care, in which case their work life had the far stronger pull. (This was in contrast to the women who typically expressed ambivalence both about the length of time their child was in day care and the advisabiity of leaving the child with a relative stranger when sick, a time when "mother" should stand by).

Is this "love afair" any different than what the traditional father experiences? He can lavish affection and great attention on his children when he is around them, precisely because being around them is a special occasion, rather than a daily occurrence. I' it different than the romanticism of the traditional husband toward marriage, in contrast to his wife's practicality? Yes, it really is, precisely because it is translated into the father's ongoing, daily experience, commitment, and responsibility for the caretaking of a child.

Both the women and the men interviewed concurred that the father in fact was quite emotionally involved and carried a great deal of responsibility for the care of the child. The interview data also revealed almost indelible divisions of labor, with complaints on the mother's part and guilty admissions on the fathers' part that certain responsibilities were near impossible to distribute equally to the man. Most significantly these

included the psychological managerial tasks, and the less visible, more subtle responsibilities of parenting (e.g, worrying about a child's peer problems at school). Yet these fathers were bonded like epoxy glue to their children.

That glue, however, was of a very different variety than the one that held the mothers to their children. The fathers' issue was not one of the fear of losing themselves in another person, as it was for the women toward their children. Their issue was the new found delight of being able to melt into another human being, to drop their guard, to "play" in a way they had not allowed themselves since they themselves were small children. In striking contrast to the mothers, when asked whether they saw their relationship with their children as "nurturing" or "intimate", the overwhelming majority of men responded "intimate".

The opportunity to relate to their child opened up avenues to the men that heretofore had either felt closed or loaded with mine fields. Women accuse men of being hard to reach, closed, uninterested in emotional interchange. This truly may be the behavior women meet up with. Yet that behavior must be separated from the desire behind it. Given the right circumstances and environment, the man in fact can open up, will open up, yearns to open up emotionally. The key requirement is that the environment feel safe. This group of men find that safe environment in their children.

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The men report a uniqueness in what their children give to them that is unmatched by the women's reports. The special thing the children provide to these fathers is the freedom to be themselves, to be the irrational, silly, playful, fanciful self they feel blocked from being with anyone else. Clinicians and psychologists have identified a gender-linked phenomenon in which a red flag goes up for a man in situations where he is feeling vulnerable, emotional, or childlike in face of a woman (cf., Dinnerstein, 1976; Rubin, 1983). His rationality, his seriousness, his emotional guardedness all serve as a protection against the danger. The danger of what? The first danger is that he will be rejected, perhaps in the way that he first felt rejected when his mother pushed him out of the nest to go off and be like Dad. At a conscious level he doubts if a woman would be able to accept him if he were too "emotional." The second danger is that he will reactivate earlier fears of maternal engulfment, swallowed up by the woman in his moment of infantile vulnerability (cf. Chodorow, 1978).

When with his child, they can both be peers in their infantile play. That child will neither engulf him, nor reject him, but delight in his silliness, his exposure of his inner, primitive self. In essence, a union occurs between two equals in those moments--the man in his regressed self, the child in his or her contemporary childhood self. So, in fact, this <u>is</u> a form of intimacy for the father, if one accepts the definition that intimacy is an exchange between two <u>equal</u> partners.

Why is this not the same for the shared parenting mother? The woman has other outlets besides her child to allow her vulnerable, emotonal, primitive self to appear--her husband, her woman friends, perhaps her own mother. Unlike her male partner, her fear is not that her emotions will be exposed, but that they will not be received. In fact, her fear is more one of putting some boundaries around her emotions, to not be "too" emotional, to not let her emotions sweep her over. She knows that she can be emotional and open up. She only wishes that her male partner would reciprocate, that he, too, would reveal himself.

When this is not forthcoming, the mother does not then turn to her child for this reciprocity, because she is quite aware that she would be barking up the wrong tree. It is certainly true that many women turn to their child as the central person in their life, leaving their husband feeling left out, excluded from their central orbit. Particularly if that child is a girl, as she grows she might become that woman's confidante. Yet this is not because the mother needs that child's presence so she herself can open up. It is because she needs that child to need her, to make her feel validated in the world. She needs someone to <u>nurture</u>. But if it is intimacy she desires, she will look elsewhere. She, unlike the man, has been afforded the opportunity, because of cultural standards and family structure (in which women hold major responsibility for the "relational" sphere), to develop her emotional, vulnerable, revealing self.

That developed emotional self needs the match of another developed emotional self. A woman hopes this match will be forthcoming in her sexual partnership as an adult. Her disappointment, if she is a heterosexual woman, is that it is not. The man is often too defended against her, and less developed in that aspect of himself, to be able to be her match.

What then happens when this woman and this man come together in a shared parenting arrangement? For one, the woman either unabashedly or embarassedly becomes jealous of the tight bond she perceives between father and child. This was often expressed in the mothers' interviews by observations that the father began bringing gifts home for the child, rather than the mother. The woman had to admit that sometimes this made her feel second best. She would also bemuse about the "love affair" between father and child. On the one hand she felt warmed, filled up by the strong connection between father and child. On the other, she felt closed out, puzzled by the ease with which the father could be spontaneous, so affectonate, so seemingly "just there"' for the child, when it was so much harder for him to do the same with her. This sentiment often came out in response to the question, "Are there ways that you see your partner with your child that you wish your partner was with you?"

This should be differentiated from another form of jealousy that ensues for the mother when she perceives that the child prefers the father over her. It was difficult still in this group of "enlightened" women for the mother to give up her

primacy as number one figure in her child's life, even when her intellect told her it could be otherwise. When this type of jealousy erupted, however, as it often did, the women were able to both understand and cope with these feelings. They were more puzzled and surprised, however, at the deprivation they experienced vis-a-vis the father. He was lavishing on the child emotional "goodies" that she herself had never or only partially received from him. The traditional father often feels closed out when his wife enters motherhood and turns her attentions away from him and toward the child. He has lost what he had taken for granted was all his. The shared parenting mother feels taken aback not because she has lost to the child what was once hers, but because she witnesses her child receiving something she never had in the first place but wanted: emotional openness from her partner.

The shared parenting father from his end is often oblivious to the rejection his partner may be experiencing. He is typically so thrilled with the psychological satisfactions of raising a child that this becomes the center of his attention. When asked the same question, "Are there any ways that your partner is with your child(ren) that you wish she was with you?", the most likely response for the fathers was, "I wish I could have more of the time that the child gets." This is strikingly reminiscent of the feelings of the traditional father who wants to reclaim some of his center stage presence. More emotional openness, however, was not a likely father response, as it was with mothers. Also in contrast to mothers' reports, the main

form of jealousy the shared parenting father expressed toward his wife or lover was not that he felt left out of the mother-child sphere, but that parenting seemed to come more easily to her than to him.

What happens to the child in this type of family? Specifically, what will transpire in her or his understanding of what mommies and daddies are made of? Because the children were not interviewed or observed directly, the following discussion is based on information and extrapolatons from the parent interviews.

The parents' reports certainly speak to the reality of strong bonding between fathers and children. In these families fathers become very accessible persons to their children. This will likely generate an understanding that men, like women, are feeling people who can express their emotions. In sum, men are no longer an abstraction in the child's early life, but are people capable of strong love and attachment in the context of daily caretaking activities.

At the same time, the children are provided with role models of women who are multidimensional in their lives and experiences. They both nurture children but also carry important resonsibilities outside the home. As one daughter of a shared parenting family excaimed, "Oh, no, Mommy, I would never want you to stay home all day. That would be really boring. I mean, what would you do?"

At an unconscious or preconscious level, the children may feel pulled by gentle, subtle tugs in a rather innovative family triangle. The mother may transmit her feelings of jealousy and frustration that the child is getting from the father what she also wants. The father may communicate his feelings of exhilaration and liberation as he turns from woman to child and discovers a much safer arena for expressing his inner soul.

The optimal outcome for the child will involve a breakdown in that triangle. The transformation will occur when the father's greater freedom of emotional expression in the parent-child sphere translates into a greater capacity in the man to express those same things in the more risky milieu of the adult male-female relationship. If this occurs, the children will benefit from an atmosphere of greater emotional openness and fewer gender-related tensions between their mothers and fathers.

If however, things stay stuck in this unexpected triangle, the child may feel some sense of being caught in the middle between father and mother. The child gets from Dad what Mom also wants from Dad. The child gets it easier than the woman does. The risk is that the child will develop a sense of omnipotence or false victory over the mother, or some sense of collusion with the father in protecting the father's newly found safe arena of emotional expression from the mother.

In addition to the new form of triangle that evolves, the child may also be affected by the fathers and mothers' differing perceptions of self as a parent as either intimate or nurturing

respectively. The mother, if she is more the nurturer than the "intimate soulmate", will perceive her child from her relative position of power and authority as an adult. This enables her to empathize and tune into the child's need for comfort and security. That process may be much more difficult for the father. He is focussiing more on the feelings of intimacy with his child. As discussed earlier, this can bring him away from the sphere of adulthood and into the arena of regression and more "primitive" states with his child.. The risk will be the perpetuation of the gender division in which women are the caretakers, and men are the people who "play" with children. This would go against the grain of what these parents themselves report as a goal for their children: to instill in them the notion that both men and women are capable of performing the full spectrum of caretaking activities.

There is, however, another way to understand the phenomenon. In all men, the desire to play with a child can be interpreted as the desire to reconnect to that earlier, primitive, spontaneous self of yesteryears, the one that got closed over. But the shared parenting father is allowed to extend this possibility through greater opportunity not just for the play, but for the contextual knowledge and familiarity with the child that can only come from the daily routine caretaking and responsibility one has for that child. In other words, he gets to really open up, not just dabble at it. This provides the child with not just one, but two emotionally available parents.

It is often said that the project of having women and men "mother" together will be a project that takes at least twogenerations of change. In the parents described in this paper we see both the possibilities and limitations of transformation within one generation. It will be the children of these parents who will have yet greater ease in sharing in the parenting of their offspring if they so choose. Unlike the traditional family where mother is dominant at the homefront, these children will have grown up in a household where they had equal familiarity with their mother and their father. They will be able to integrate the reported "intimacy" of their fathers and the "nurturing" of their mothers so that these qualities are not divided between two people but are woven into one person, male or female. That person, then, when he or she grows up, will be able to offer to his or her child both "play" and "nurturance", both intimacy and boundaries.

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